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### Abstract

Between January 1987 and June 1989 some 1400 people were killed in incidents of politically-motivated violence in an area of 374 square kilometres around Pietermaritzburg in the Natal Midlands in South Africa<sup>1</sup>. In the same area an estimated 1000 houses were destroyed, some 10,000 people moved house permanently, and another 10 to 15 thousand had to flee their homes for some part of the period in question. The South African State, represented by Cabinet Ministers and South African Police (SAP) spokesmen in particular, made consistent efforts to downplay the conflict until it suddenly became an excuse for not lifting the State of Emergency. Despite the denials, it was all too clear that a major political conflict of mounting intensity, amounting in effect to a civil war, was raging in the Natal Midlands, despite the draconian measures for the suppression of political dissent embodied in the Internal Security Act and the Emergency Regulations. The consequences for the several hundred thousand black inhabitants of the area were devastating.

DAVID MAUGHAN BROWN

## 'An Unfinished Mourning': Echo Poems from Pietermaritzburg

So, give me pen and paper  
I will write  
Verses in the midst of torture.

Mlungisi Mkhize *Echo* 9/6/88

### INTRODUCTION

Between January 1987 and June 1989 some 1400 people were killed in incidents of politically-motivated violence in an area of 374 square kilometres around Pietermaritzburg in the Natal Midlands in South Africa<sup>1</sup>. In the same area an estimated 1000 houses were destroyed, some 10,000 people moved house permanently, and another 10 to 15 thousand had to flee their homes for some part of the period in question. The South African State, represented by Cabinet Ministers and South African Police (SAP) spokesmen in particular, made consistent efforts to downplay the conflict until it suddenly became an excuse for not lifting the State of Emergency. Despite the denials, it was all too clear that a major political conflict of mounting intensity, amounting in effect to a civil war, was raging in the Natal Midlands, despite the draconian measures for the suppression of political dissent embodied in the Internal Security Act and the Emergency Regulations. The consequences for the several hundred thousand black inhabitants of the area were devastating.

Throughout this period the Pietermaritzburg daily newspaper, the *Natal Witness*, published a 'poetry corner' in its weekly supplement, *Echo*, which is addressed largely to a black readership. A number of the poems, in both English and Zulu, dealt directly with, or touched indirectly on, the political conflict in the area, despite the potentially deadly danger of incurring the displeasure of one side or the other in the conflict, and despite the Emergency Regulations' prohibition of criticism of the ironically termed 'security' forces. But the number of poems touching on the conflict – amounting to no more than 10% of the poems written in English – is very small, given the way the conflict dominated the lives of the people.

Publication of the *Echo* poetry corner was suspended at the end of 1989, though there are plans to resurrect it. The violence in Natal reached new and catastrophic levels in the first few months of 1990 and has claimed the lives of some of the poets published in *Echo*. This paper can focus only on the period from January 1987 to June/July 1989, and has no pretensions to being more than a tentative introduction. More work waits to be done on the poems written in English since July 1989 and, perhaps even more urgently, on the poems in Zulu written over the whole period.

In affording a weekly platform to aspirant and often very inexperienced poets from Natal's 'townships' *Echo* performed a function comparable, if on a smaller scale, to that performed by *Staffrider* magazine in the early years of its existence. Consequently it posed many of the same problems for literary criticism with regard to evaluative criteria. My interest in this paper will not be in an evaluation of these poems against some normative 'standard' of 'good poetry' but in looking at the poetry as a significant component of the cultural production arising out of a particular set of social and political conditions, on which it is able to shed light that cannot be obtained from any other source. The *Echo* poems serve to make the human cost of the conflict real in ways that political analysis and statistical data, however instructive, cannot.

## THE POLITICAL CONTEXT

The history of the political violence in the Pietermaritzburg area is strongly contested by the two major parties to the conflict: Inkatha, the governing political party in the KwaZulu Legislative Assembly (KLA), originally founded as a Zulu 'cultural' organization by Chief Gatsha Buthelezi in 1975 and laying claim to being the largest black political organization in South Africa; and the UDF a loosely structured grouping of affiliated organisations, ranging from darts clubs to trade unions, united in their opposition to the apartheid system and in their desire to see South Africa transformed into a unitary, non-racial and democratic society. As the governing party of the KwaZulu bantustan, deriving much of its political strength from the authority of conservative 'chiefs' in rural areas, Inkatha would obviously find more favour with the South African state (in spite of Buthelezi's refusal to accept full 'independence' for KwaZulu) than the UDF, which was perceived as a 'radical' internal front for the African National Congress (ANC). As the major sponsor of the KwaZulu-Natal Indaba, a forum promoting a regional federation for Natal and KwaZulu, with belief in a free-market economy as the main cement for the prospective union, Inkatha has generally been looked on much more favourably by the business sector in Natal, and by the English-language media, than the UDF, which was perceived as supporting the 'socialist' tendencies of the Freedom Charter.

The monthly death-toll of political violence in the Pietermaritzburg area rose from one death in January 1987 to 161 in January 1988. Whatever particular event triggered this escalation, the ground for future conflict between Inkatha and community-based political activists more radically opposed to the South African government can be seen to have been laid ten years earlier. The essence of the argument has been succinctly put by Gerhard Maré:<sup>2</sup>

Only a year after its launch, the 1976 student rebellion in Soweto put the writing on the wall for Inkatha. It signified the start of mass politics with a national scope that had nothing at all to do with Inkatha or Natal regional politics.... The Soweto rebellion...shifted politics into 'the community', with issues of education, rent, local government, services, transport, etc. These were the very areas that Inkatha controlled as a bantustan government and therefore posed a direct challenge to it. Inkatha and the KLA became involved in action against school boycotters, transport boycotts, rent boycotts. Increasingly it had to act as part of the system it was now based in. (p. 72)

Inkatha's claim to a place in national politics, on which Buthelezi's own ambitions as a national politician rested, depended on its claims to being the political organization with the greatest mass support in the country. Its dominant position in the KwaZulu-Natal Indaba similarly depended on its claims to being able to mobilize the overwhelming majority of blacks in Natal in support of multi-racialism, federalism and capitalism. Both these claims were severely dented by the success of consumer boycotts and stayaways against which Inkatha had campaigned very actively. With its power-base apparently eroding and the credibility of its claim to represent the black people of Natal in jeopardy, Inkatha mounted aggressive recruiting drives in areas around Pietermaritzburg from mid-1987.

Forced recruitment into Inkatha was resisted by the formation of 'defence committees' organized along the lines of street committees (see South African Labour Bulletin [SABL], February 1988: pp. 16-43) which did not necessarily, at least at the outset, have any particular political affiliation - as one participant put it: 'Once the people united, Inkatha supporters called them UDF. So people said "What the hell, let's be UDF!"' (SABL:p. 34). The defence committees often succeeded in keeping Inkatha vigilantes out of what thereby became 'UDF' areas. Inkatha's campaign of forced recruitment would appear to have resulted in the disaffection of substantial numbers of previously apolitical township residents. Moreover, the flood of young activists seeking asylum in outlying areas resulted in the politicization of rural areas which had previously languished under the largely unquestioned authority of traditional (Inkatha) chiefs. By the end of 1987 community support for Inkatha appeared to be very much on the decline. The Inkatha response was, by UDF and COSATU accounts, to launch an intensified campaign, the violence of whose coercion was met with violent resistance and resulted in the 161 deaths in January 1988.

Evidence of state support for Inkatha comes in many forms, from the political affiliations of those detained under Emergency regulations in Natal to the turning of blind eyes to Inkatha rallies held in flagrant contravention of those same regulations. Inkatha 'warlords' who were known to have been involved in the killings, and against whom sworn affidavits had been filed and judicial interdicts granted, were allowed to operate openly in the townships. The police attitude was clearly articulated by the Minister of Law and Order in February 1988: '...the police intend to face the future with moderates and fight against radical groups.... Radicals, who are trying to destroy South Africa, will not be tolerated. We will fight them. We have put our foot in that direction, and we will eventually win the Pietermaritzburg area' (*Natal Witness* 27/2/88). From late 1987 there were numerous attempts to bring the opposing sides in the conflict together for peace talks. Inkatha showed some interest in talks but it would appear that its main, if not only, interest in participating in peace talks lay in obtaining recognition for itself from the UDF as a national political organization – Inkatha has constantly, up to the present, called for the talks to be held at national leadership level.

The dramatic escalation of the violence in the first months of 1990 and its transfer to the Transvaal townships in mid-1990 would seem likely, at least in part, to have been the result of desperate last-ditch attempts by Inkatha to establish Buthelezi's position as a serious contender for political power, or at least as a crucial participant in any negotiating process, in the face of the massive groundswell of popular support for Mandela and the ANC in the immediate aftermath of their respective release and unbanning.

## THE ECHO POEMS

### (i) Intended Functions

Analysis of the poems suggests that they are intended by their writers to perform a variety of functions, some simple, others much more complex. At one end of the spectrum are a number of poems which are clearly intended as vehicles of a straight-forward didacticism. The *Echo* Poetry Corner has a relatively wide readership and offers scope for instructing the youth. The pages of *Echo* become a conduit whereby the wisdom traditionally associated with age can be conveyed to youth dislocated by urbanization and dispersed by the conflict. Thus, for example, we find a poem by S'khumbuzo Mvelase (27/10/88) titled 'Violence' conveying a direct warning to young readers:

We are wiped out  
By a disease which we call violence

It takes friends which we loved  
 Mothers, fathers, sisters and brothers....  
 It looks as if there is a black cloud  
 Hanging over this earth  
 Which has come to take our youth....  
 Now we want to warn our sons and daughters  
 Don't let your heart rule your head  
 Because it can never be satisfied.

The need for unity is the essence of the message most frequently conveyed by the poems – as seen in Oupa Jackson's 'My Last Words, Said Moloko':

and how many of your people  
 must you kill until you know  
 that you have killed enough.  
 I swear there will be no  
 freedom for you if you are  
 not united.

A second function performed by the poems is the direct expression of grief and lamentation, to which I will return later. A third distinct function can be seen to be very similar to that claimed by Ngugi for his early novel about the Emergency in Kenya, *Weep Not, Child*: 'Actually in the novel I have tried to show the effect of the Mau Mau war on the ordinary man and woman who were left in the villages. I think the terrible thing about the Mau Mau war was the destruction of family life, the destruction of personal relationships.'<sup>3</sup>

Short poems obviously do not provide the novel's scope for rendering the effects of violent political conflict on those caught up in it, in terms of fear, loss and physical suffering, but the destruction of family life and personal relationships are vividly realized in many of these poems. The dominant images are of blood and fire. Thus Pietermaritzburg is addressed as '...city of blood, tears and repression' (Abraham Ntombela, 'Today and Tomorrow', 9/2/89) and the reader is told

...I can't see this place  
 Properly, my eyes are prohibited  
 By curtains of blood

(Shoba Mthlane, 'Curtains of Blood', 26/5/88)

The images of fire often incorporate references to 'necklacing'. The fullest development of this imagery is found in Ndlovu's 'What's Happening in Maritzburg?' (18/2/88):

Tell them about Maritzburg  
 Say the capital city is on fire  
 Flames are burning like that  
 Of a tractor tyre size necklace



Above the city's head plays the cloud  
The cloud of crisis which is the outcome  
Of this burning capital city of Natal  
Day and night - no difference  
There's always darkness  
People do not recognise each other...

Here the image is of the whole city being necklaced. The poem sees Pietermaritzburg as a totality, a single body whose anguish can be conveyed via the image of the encircling flaming tractor tyre burning the city alive. This image is symptomatic of the kind of partitioned perception fostered by apartheid and made inevitable by the Group Areas Act. The image of a single burning body does not recognize the extent to which the white suburbs of Pietermaritzburg, ostensibly part of that single body, remain unaffected by, and almost wholly indifferent to, the conflict raging around them. The necklacing image conveys a vision of an endlessly self-regenerated pattern of blind violence: the oily black smoke from the burning tyre shuts out the light; the darkness prevents people from recognizing each other's, and their own, humanity; so in the darkness they add each other to the conflagration. The only winners are the 'ravenous' graveyards.

The only poem to dwell at any length on the role of the poet in the conflict, is Bonginkosi Ndlovu Bafanyana's 'Viva Pen of Culture' (11/5/89):

What is happening in my land?  
My land is a desert of truth,  
The emergency swallows every drop of reality.  
Inequality is reality; reality is abnormality;  
Like howling dogs  
Ignorance haunts the voice of the people  
Pregnant with the voice of my people.  
Are the garbage bins of parliament,  
Exploding with squeezed-in voices of my people -  
Viva pen of culture, viva!  
What is happening in Azania?  
I see normality becoming abnormality,  
Abnormality becoming normality,  
Truth is a taboo in my land,  
Like ravenous lions, jails devouring my people,  
Graves voraciously devouring the people, and yet  
Accumulated emotions  
Burst the breast of the survivalists -  
Viva pen of culture, viva!  
Viva pen of resistance, viva!  
Draining the flooding emotions of my people;  
Oozing the aspirations of my people;  
Voicing the voices of the voiceless;  
Voicing the opinions of the voiceless -  
Viva pen of culture, viva pen of resistance!



Pen of resistance:  
Your extreme silent voice  
Will remove the stubborn lids  
Of the garbage bins of parliament;  
The hands of your voice  
Will remove the shroud of lies –  
Viva pen of culture, viva  
For you have nothing to lose!

Here the primary function of the poet's pen is to present the truth in a country where truth is as desperately needed as water in a desert. The state of Emergency 'swallows every drop of reality' to the extent that it is a strategy for the forcible entrenchment of apartheid's version of 'truth', which involves a reordering of reality whereby the abnormal becomes 'normal'. The grotesque inequalities of South African society are presented as normal – they are 'naturalized' in the hope of winning the ideological assent of their victims. Poetry has a practical usefulness to the struggle – as signified by the 'hands on' implication of 'The hands of your voice' – whose function is to remove the 'shroud of lies' covering the dead desert land.

The image, 'Like howling dogs / Ignorance haunts the voices of the people', is highly condensed. The withholding of truth results in the willed ignorance of the people. Ignorance, whether deliberate or otherwise, debases the people, who cry out for truth as dogs howl for sustenance – and as a consequence of their hunger and debasement they embody the same potential for brutal violence as the 'howling dogs'. The poet's function is to dispel the ignorance.

'The garbage bins of parliament' encapsulates the essence of the relationship between constitutionalist white and black politics and simultaneously offers an explanation of the eventual resort to armed conflict on the part of blacks. White politics trashes the aspirations of the black majority, whose petitions, pleas and protests end up in the 'garbage bins of parliament'. There comes a point, however, when the garbage bins cannot hold any more, however hard it is crushed in, at which point they explode. When the voices of the people are squeezed into bins until they burst, what the explosions produce in the first instance is language in the form of pamphlet bombs. The associations are, however, with bombs of more than one kind: many of the bombs that have exploded with deadly effect in South Africa in recent years were hidden in garbage bins. The implication is that there is a poetic justice in this 'striking back' of the garbage bins to which the requests and reasoning of blacks have been consigned. The image is carried through to the end of the poem where the hope is expressed that what is produced by the 'extreme silent voice' of the pen of resistance, less easily suppressed perhaps than other manifestations of the voice of the people, may after all succeed in prising the lids off the garbage bins of parliament and allowing what is in them a hearing.

The reiterated 'Vivas' convey something of the fervour of a black South African political meeting and serve as a device which signals the relationship between cultural production and politics.

## (ii) Political Content and Effect of the Poems

The major political thrust of the *Echo* poems lies in such calls for unity as that found in the lines from '...Nkeli, but why?':

...Why fighting  
While they can think?  
Why celebrating  
While fulfilling the oppressor's wish?....  
May God join the oppressed together  
And guide them.  
In a final assault on apartheid.

The recognition of the need for unity develops out of the desire for peace which is the most frequently repeated refrain running through the poems:

Let peace be among the oppressed  
Let the killing and hatred cease  
Let the oppressor bear the consequences  
For the time has come  
For ma-Afrika to unite.

The other obvious political function performed by those poems that do have explicit political messages lies in the boosting of morale – shown by some of the poems to be at a very low ebb. So we find the sense of futility embodied in lines such as those that conclude Ndlovu's 'What's Happening In Maritzburg?' – 'But others fear that the outcome is nonsense, / It is millions of millions of kilograms of ashes' – being countered by assertions of the necessity for the struggle, such, for example, as that contained in Mlungisi Mlambo's 'The Refugees' (13/7/89): 'Only through their struggle for equal rights/ Can they live a better life.'

The other 'political' aspect of these poems that needs to be looked at briefly is the extent to which many of them are political by default. The majority of the poems eschew political solutions and look to God for a resolution of the conflict. So one finds S'Fiso Mauze ('I Cry For Peace', 1/12/89) and Dumisani Mngadi ('Who Can Give Us Peace', 15/12/89) both interpreting the political violence in Pietermaritzburg as God's punishment for sin: Mauze asks, 'Where are you Lord? Do you like this? / Is this the punishment we deserve?' and Mngadi declares:

Only the Lord must save us  
 I cry for peace... It's over, our punishment  
 God don't make me disbelieve you.

At times the poems are simply prayers, as in Shoba Mthalande's 'Curtains Of Blood':

... "Oh Lord God, I implore  
 You to let down your  
 Benedicted spirit over Clermont"  
 Amen.

There is obviously no need here to go into the role played by imported western religion in colonized societies. It is necessary only to note that the tendency in much of this poetry to turn to God for a solution to the conflict in Pietermaritzburg appears to involve an evasion of any consideration of the need for political organisation on the ground and renders any socio-political analysis of the situation superfluous. It should be recognized, however, that religious sentiment is in some instances clearly being used as a device whereby political commentary can assume the guise of piety and prayer. This is most obvious in the recurrent comparison between the miserable lives lived by those still alive on earth and the paradisaical after-lives of those who have been killed in the conflict, which is used often enough to have become almost conventional. One sees this, for example, in:

Blessed are the dead  
                                     For they will:  
 Never be suspected,  
 Never be chased,  
 Never be unmanageable  
 Never be transformed into firewood  
 Never be killed  
                                     For they are now:  
 Protected from adversaries  
 Saved from opponents  
 Secured from the persecution of this world  
 Blessed are those who are dead  
                                     For they have the benediction  
 Of living eternal and everlasting life.

These lines capture with great economy the atmosphere of fear and suspicion, the nightmare of being chased and torched.

The opposition between the heaven achieved by death in the struggle and the hell on earth endured by those who survive is most fully developed as a framing device for comment on the political conflict by Ellington Ngunezi in his 'Death On My Doorsteps' (15/9/88). This poem

deserves to be quoted in full, not only because it reveals very clearly the contradictions that can result from the adoption of the formal device of the Heaven/Hell comparison, but also because it is one of the most moving laments to be found among the *Echo* poems and provides a very vivid eyewitness narrative of one of the 1400 killings which occurred prior to July 1989.

After seeing their targets  
On the road  
They alighted from a bus  
And gave them chase;  
Then they saw you standing in your home yard  
As their targets ran past the gate  
They thought you were one of them,  
Gave you chase,  
Then caught you, then killed you  
O Lins, Lins,  
A few minutes later  
You laid on the street  
Serene in rivulets of blood.  
I know you've met Mdayisi,  
Tana, S'fiso, Mlu, Magugu, Hleke, Nhlanhla,  
And the rest;  
I am sure you have revised  
Your respective brutal deaths.  
And there is no complaining  
About anything anymore.  
And there are no temptations any more.  
And there is not eating, no smoking,  
No drinking, no cinemas,  
And there is no womanising  
O Lins, Lins  
Your movement to Heaven  
Was a reminder that we are  
Not for this world,  
We all have to be covered with  
Our last blankets some day;  
Soil,  
O Lins, Lins,  
You have reached a stage  
Of total tranquility and eternity.

The lament is so poignant partly because the poet is wholly unconvincing in his attempt to depict a state of being so entirely lacking in temptation as 'Heaven'. The first nine lines of the poem present a matter-of-fact narrative of events which serves to highlight the accidental relationship between life and death in this conflict and the casual way people become no more than dehumanised 'targets'. The lament 'O Lins, Lins' carries a

weight of sorrow which by the end of the poem, although repeated only twice, manages to take on the character of a choric keening. 'You laid on the street' conveys both 'laid' out and 'laid' low, and emphasises the suddenness with which Lins, too, has become a mere object lying in the road. The paradox of 'Serene in rivulets of blood' evokes the observer's surprise at the contrast between the serenity of the corpse and his own shock and trauma. The remainder of the poem consists of the writer's strategies for finding meaning in, and consolation for, Lins's death.

The first strategy involves the inclusion of Lins in the roll of honour of others who have met brutal deaths – the recitation of whose names serves to underline the extent of the death-toll. The use of 'revised' hints at some kind of common analysis, the drawing of conclusions – which must presumably be political – from the common experience of brutal death. But any embryonic political analysis is abandoned in favour of what proves a radically unconvincing set of conclusions drawn from the alternative frame of reference provided by religion. The writer attempts to present himself as envious of Lins's state of non-being which is characterised by the absence of temptations: no eating, smoking, drinking, cinemas or womanising. The selection of the various temptations is obviously based on their desirability, which brings the writer's rationalisation into visible tension with his emotions and inclinations. The grief encapsulated in the second 'O Lins, Lins' does not reflect the writer's posture of satisfaction on Lins's behalf that there are to be no more temptations, it comes across rather as a lament that he and Lins will never eat, drink, smoke, womanise or go to the cinema together again. The 'hell' of the Heaven/Hell opposition is here quite simply not a hell. The personal loss, the nostalgia for the good times with Lins, overrides for the moment the socio-economic and political context.

The construction of Lins's death as a *memento mori*, the neat and timely purveyor of a religious moral, in the last lines of the poem comes across as a travesty of the personal grief experienced by the poet and overwhelmingly conveyed by the poem – a travesty which is betrayed as such by the again repeated 'O Lins, Lins' three lines from the end. Beside the real attractions of being alive, and beside the concrete local reference in the image of soil as 'our last blankets', Lins's ostensibly envied 'stage of total tranquillity and eternity', seems empty abstract. This poem reveals very starkly the contradictions consequent upon the displacement of the political onto the religious terrain. The constraints, under which the poems were produced, the constraints of what amounts in many respects to a colonial civil war fought under the auspices of the colonizers, are to be held responsible for that displacement.

(iii) 'Just Before Embracing Dawn' and 'It's A Weekend Again'.

The *Echo* poems constitute a substantial body of poetry to whose individual components scant justice can be done by a purely thematic analysis. I would therefore like to conclude this paper by looking in a little more detail at two of the poems. The first is the short poem by Mlungisi Mkhize (published 9/6/88) from which my epigraph was taken:

JUST BEFORE EMBRACING DAWN  
(16/01/1987)

The door was banged  
House filled with authoritative voices  
Bright torches cutting closed eyeballs  
Slashing the flesh of night  
Came fire-wielding men.

And when the tool of flames  
Pointed at me, threats unfounded  
My writings keenly scrutinized,  
New strength pervaded my entire being.

So, give me a pen and paper  
I will write  
Verses in the midst of torture.

This poem is notable, firstly, as a resistance poem – a poem which finds inspiration in the struggle against the overwhelming might of the South African state. The poem declares itself as having sprung from attempts by the security apparatus to intimidate the poet into silence. It is notable, secondly, for the sustained ambiguity of its language, which imparts a suggestive complexity to what looks at first sight to be a very straightforward poem.

The ambiguity starts with the title which could be merely descriptive of the time, just before dawn (the usual time for such occurrences), when the raid which is the subject of the poem took place. But the grammatical relationship between 'embracing' and 'dawn' is unclear. Is 'embracing' adjectivally descriptive of this particular dawn, or does it take 'dawn' as its object? If the latter, then 'dawn' is presumably symbolic of the future coming of liberation and the title would refer forward to the poet's picking up pen and paper and writing verses which will assist in ushering in that dawn.

The first stanza clearly suggests a raid by the 'authorities', in this case police with 'authoritative voices', with doors being banged and torches shone on sleeping faces. The violence of the intrusion is conveyed by the image of the torches 'cutting closed eyeballs' and 'slashing the flesh of night'. But the mode of ambiguity of the title is carried over into the poem



via the overlaying of the image of a gang of political arsonists over the image of the police going about their supposedly 'lawful' business: 'Slashing the flesh of the night / Came fire-wielding men.' The policemen with their torches are also 'fire-wielding men', whose intrusion slashes the flesh of the night with a violence equivalent to that of the knife- and torch-wielding arsonists. In the second stanza the electric torches of the police as they scrutinize the poet's writings, with destructive intent, are described as 'the tool of flames' and the associations of 'slashing' also carry over into the 'keen' scrutiny.

But the attempt to intimidate the poet backfires and instead causes new strength to pervade his being. By the end of the poem the 'authoritative voice' has become that of the poet, rather than that of officialdom, as he declares his intention to write poetry 'in the midst of torture' – whether the torture is inflicted with total indemnity by the police, or with impunity by the mob. Mkhize succeeds very well in utilizing the ambiguity of poetic language to produce a slashing indictment of the 'security forces' without laying himself open to charges under the State of Emergency Media Regulations.

The second poem I want to examine is 'It's A Weekend Again' (24/9/89) written in Imbali under the nom-de-plume 'Afropoet':

#### IT'S A WEEKEND AGAIN

It's a weekend again  
 Execution time  
 Daggers ready to obey orders  
 Our townships like a hive  
 Ever swelling with anger  
 Death staring at us like a hungry wolf  
 Women wail through the night  
 African women.  
 Bullets fly in the air  
 Unleashing death  
 Children lying in tatters  
 Blood flowing profusely  
 Fresh yet new blood  
 Wolves parading our streets  
 Their teeth dripping with blood  
 It's yet another procession  
 Sinathing!  
 You have seen nothing  
 The worst is yet to come  
 Mountain Rise!  
 You rose and the mountains echoed  
 Haughtily you swallowed them.  
 It's you and I  
 Locked up there  
 Peeping through key holes



Watching revolution live.  
Is this freedom?

This poem carries an implicit, and very damning, critique of the violence of both sides, and it is presumably this that makes the poet feel it advisable to write under a nom-de-plume. Imbali was the original seat of the violence, insofar as any area around Pietermaritzburg can be identified as such, and criticism of the conflict as a whole could all too easily be interpreted as hostility to either, or both, parties to the conflict – with possibly fatal consequences.

The opening lines appear matter-of-fact in their acceptance of weekends as 'execution time' when people become mere killing instruments: 'Daggers ready to obey orders...'. The collage of images of violence that follows relies heavily on images of animality: the townships' potential for eruptions of infuriated, mindless and dehumanized violence is likened to that of a hive of the notorious African wild bees; killers swaggering down the streets congratulating themselves on their successes are likened to wolves with bloodied teeth. The progression, via 'unleashing', from the image of 'Death staring at us like a hungry wolf' to 'Wolves parading our streets' suggests that the criticism is being levelled impartially at both sides. Through the stress on 'our' streets the wolves are shown to be alien; the poet is claiming possession of the ground on behalf of the community and dismissing both sides as guilty of a violence which is alien to the community. Wolves are not indigenous to Africa.

The image of 'children lying in tatters / Blood flowing profusely / Fresh yet new blood' draws, in 'tatters', on the portrayal of poverty, which is obviously relevant to an understanding of some aspects of the violence, to produce the horrific image of the dead children lying as 'tattered' in their violent deaths as the rags they wear.

The direct address by name to Pietermaritzburg's two cemeteries, Sinathing and Mountain Rise, the only place names to occur in the poem, suggests that they, rather than the city itself, have become the focal points of activity in the area. The pun on 'see nothing' adds a macabre touch of humour, but also carries a weight of foreboding and, given the date of the poem's publication, reveals considerable prophetic insight into the political dynamics of the conflict – the worst was indeed yet to come. The grandiloquent lines addressed to Mountain Rise, 'You rose and the mountains echoed / Haughtily you swallowed them' provide a contrast to the demeaning situation of the writer and the 'you' to whom he addresses the last lines:

It's you and I  
Locked up there  
Peeping through key holes  
Watching revolution live.  
Is this freedom?

These lines not only capture the sense of constriction and fear in everyday life, they also succeed in articulating very starkly the key political issues raised for the poet by his experience of weekend political conflict in Pietermaritzburg's townships. Living locked up in fear of one's life, having to watch the world through a key hole, is not the poet's idea of freedom. The ambiguity raised by the two possible ways of pronouncing 'live' also serves to raise questions about media coverage of the violence and about the contrast between the political theory and the lived experience of revolution. Watching revolution 'live' is very different from watching it pre-recorded and edited to suit particular ideological interests. However, given the almost total absence of coverage of the conflict by the state television, the main thrust of these lines is to articulate fundamental questions about revolution raised for the poet by his experience of the conflict.

In suggesting that revolution appears to him, from his vantage point at the key hole, to consist of packs of human wolves roaming the streets looking for candidates for the city cemeteries, the writer highlights one of the major effects of the political constraints under which this body of poetry was written: the almost total absence from the poetry of any analysis of political process. It is extremely difficult for those 'locked up' in fear of their lives, and viewing the world through key holes, to perceive political causation, to look beyond the immediate conflict (in any direction other than heavenwards) and make the connections between the violence as it is experienced and the underlying political and economic forces which determine it. The poems thus offer valuable insights into the experience of those involved in or affected by the conflict, but cannot be expected, except by default, to provide much insight into its political dynamics.

This is not, of course, to suggest that the poems don't shed a good deal of indirect light on political process. A symptomatic analysis of this poem, for which there is not the space here, would want to focus attention on the frames of reference drawn on for its imagery, and through that on the ideological derivation of its perception of the conflict. 'Wolves' is clearly Eurocentric, while the image of the townships like a 'hive ... swelling with anger' may have a local frame of reference but is clearly being applied in a way uncomfortably reminiscent of van der Post's comparison of 'rioting' black dockworkers to swarming bees in *The Hunter and the Whale*.<sup>4</sup>

## CONCLUSION

I want, by way of conclusion, to return briefly to the question of evaluation. Poems like the ones under discussion have the effect of revealing that there exist social and political circumstances – experienced by their victims in the destitution and oppression of daily living – which, if successfully communicated by literature, in however rudimentary a way (and

my analysis will, I hope, have shown that many of these poems are by no means rudimentary), must bring the 'objective' ideals of academic literary criticism into tension, if not contradiction, with the liberal sympathies which inform the academy's institutional political stance. If the liberal humanist values advocated, and said to be cultivated, by the study of 'great literature' are engaged in the reading of poems written about the experience of oppression, and if the poetry is successful in its intention of awakening in the reader an awareness and appreciation of what it means to live through these political circumstances, that will involve a taking of sides. This obviously need not necessarily be at the simple level of choosing between the UDF on the one hand and the Inkatha/South African state alliance on the other. Withdrawal from the position of initial engagement, to the elevated and detached vantage-point of 'balance' or 'neutrality' under the dictates of academic 'objectivity', must also constitute a process of political distancing.

Literary criticism needs to find ways of engaging seriously with the 'voice of the voiceless', with such articulations of the people's experience as those looked at in this paper – which has attempted to examine the poems in the light of the objective conditions under which they were produced. To ignore these poems on account of the journalistic or popular cultural medium through which they were published, to dismiss them from consideration on the grounds of their functionalism, or their lack of 'literary' polish, would have rather too much in common with the oppressor's rejection of the voice of the oppressed for comfort. One would not wish the waste-paper baskets of literary criticism to become the cultural equivalent of 'the garbage bins of parliament'.

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## NOTES

1. Throughout this paper my account of the Pietermaritzburg conflict is heavily indebted to John Aitchison and the work of the Unrest Monitoring Project of the Centre for Adult Education of the University of Natal, (Aitchison, 1988 & 1989). See J.J.W. Aitchison, 'Numbering the Dead - Patterns in the Midlands Violence', Pietermaritzburg: Centre for Adult Education, University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg 1988; J.J.W. Aitchison, 'The Pietermaritzburg Conflict - Experience and Analysis', Pietermaritzburg: Centre for Adult Education, University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg 1989.
2. Gerhard Maré, 'Inkatha: "By the Grace of the Nationalist Government?"', *South African Labour Bulletin*, 13, 2, pp. 63-73.
3. D. Duerden and C. Pieterse, *African Writers Talking*, (London: Heinemann, 1972), p. 21.
4. Laurens van der Post, *The Hunter and the Whale*, (London: Hogarth, 1967), p. 51.

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